

CREMATION AND CHOLERA

BY

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If ever there was a time when Cremation should be thoroughly ventilated and obtain a reasonable hearing it is now (August, 1884). The country is threatened with a disease of a virulent kind and type, and susceptible of rapid propagation. The importance of arresting all modes of contagion cannot be overestimated, and undoubtedly a temperature sufficiently high to be destructive of the germs of causation is the barrier which sanitary science calls upon us to erect against the assaults of an unsparing foe. There is nothing new in this. Sanitary science does but confirm and make imperative what has long been known. But, unfortunately, modern science is one thing; and modern intelligence in its practical application to the machinery of social life is another. It has been shown by two foremost scientific men that the process of Cremation is the speediest and most efficacious mode of destroying that centre of personal corruption, and therefore possible disease, which each man becomes to his neighbours the moment he has passed the line of demarcation between life and death. Of the many ways in which Art aids and becomes the hand-

maid of Nature none is so striking and so salutary as that in which she can be brought to expedite the slow processes of decay. If the thousands who are yearly consigned to mother earth about this great Babylon of ours were given at once to consuming fire there would be a sensible diminution in the bills of mortality, and an appreciable rise in what may be called the floating health of the population. For not only in the percolation of decomposing fluids from burying-grounds into wells and springs, and in mephitic exhalations from the surface, is fever generated; but many have been stricken down in the actual transport of their dead ones upon living shoulders from the old relinquished home to the new and long home appointed for the race. And at the cruel graveside, under exposure and depressing conditions which invite disease, thousands are tapped on the shoulder, and warned for the first time that their departure likewise cannot be far distant.

If these things are so, if death and burial under ordinary conditions are so pregnant with disaster to the survivors, what must they be when the most destructive of known epidemics has forced an entrance into our gates? Then we are called upon to put away the dead with the same rapidity as death has put away life. How shall it be done? What can we do respectfully to those who are no more, and preservatively for those who are left behind and are charged with the conduct of the funereal rites? There is only one answer; there is only one process which can do satisfactorily all that we are bound to do. The Legislature cannot make it compulsory, because public feeling is against it. But if Asiatic cholera comes to us in its most deadly and sweeping

form, public opinion will be likely to change. When a terrible mischief has been effected we shall see how ill-advised we have been in our way of meeting it, how grossly we have neglected one important preventive measure. Is it really possible that we are deterred from utilising at once the most complete poison-cleanser known to us because the process of burning the dead is a heathen custom? But, let it be asked, has Cremation in Eastern countries been used for the purposes for which we propose to use it; or in obedience to the requirements of a creed with which we have no sympathy, and which Christianity seeks to supplant? It is strange we should have such a dread of fire in treating the dead, when we have treated the living with it so unsparingly. It is the recognised purgatorial weapon by which in the "intermediate state" souls are to be fitted for immortal bliss. It was once the acknowledged instrument of proselytising creeds for converting or annihilating unbelievers. It is the symposium to which some religionists consign the faithless for a measureless and unlimited period which we call eternal. And yet for our inanimate structures, now susceptible only of pernicious changes which fire might anticipate, we create a furnished apartment which is out of all character and keeping with its occupant. The flame is a kindlier wrapping than the shroud and the coffin. It may be, and no doubt it is, very natural to put away our loved ones softly and tenderly, to pillow the head which can ache no more, and environ with flowers the new-made dead. But there is something essentially distressing in that daily contemplation which possesses the mourner's mind, of the ravages which decay is making in the forms we have so long

regarded, and in the lineaments which have been so unspeakably dear to us.

It seems hard to attempt to dethrone what is termed "sentiment." But it must go down with all of us before the sweeping pressure of sanitary legislation. Better, surely, than slow corruption is the quick destruction of the devouring flame. Better the little urn upon our mantel-shelf, or in a more secret place, with its ounce or two of ashes (a residuum modern burial does not yield) which had once been invested with life. Or better, perhaps (as would probably be the common desire), that the winds should encircle them and carry them where they can play their part in helping to build up a new generation. No doubt the actual consignment of a body to the flames is for the moment a tearing wrench to a heart which is charged with love and tenderness. But consider how much long and silent suffering it is spared in that realistic contemplation of decay from which, in what we term "Christian Burial," there is no escape. And this Cremation need not in any way interfere with the modest or (according to taste) vulgar and pretentious monumental record of the virtues of those who one by one are taken from us. The vulgar mind might find its solace in a costly structure in its own grounds, with the urned ashes under the head-stone, and make a show of it to the neighbourhood. Mural tablets and brasses, under discreet limitation, might still be within our churches, now dispossessed of graveyards. Memorial windows might be multiplied, and so the beauty of our churches increased.

We are, happily, in a position to recognize the great improvements which have been made during the last ten or

fifteen years in the mode of "conducting" funerals. They have been shorn of much of their offensive pomp and splendour, and the vulgar and purse-proud alone find a satisfaction in putting away the dead out of sight with trappings and decorations. If to such an extent we have already combated successfully the unwise customs of our ancestors, surely we may yet more successfully break from the past, and inaugurate a new reign of dust and ashes. In this reign sustained health will be more assured, the occurrence of a certain class of diseases minimized, the preservation of thousands of acres secured for life-giving instead of dangerous purposes, the funeral expenses of all classes reduced, and an impetus given to that progress which recognizes every improvement and lays its hand upon every abuse.

There is no occasion here to enter into any details of the financial or mechanical data which involve the success of cremation when once fairly and freely entered upon. The admirable reprint of Sir Henry Thompson's letter upon this subject furnishes the information required. With this reprint is associated a letter by Sir Spencer Wells warmly advocating the views of his professional brother. Unfortunately the hindrance which lies in the way of change in our burial customs springs from stupid obstinacy, offensive pride, and a misconception of the religious aspect of this question. From three sections, obviously, of society these three obstructive difficulties arise. The two first, from their very nature, claim no consideration from cremationists, and it is quite unnecessary to reply to them. The stupid and the proud have hampered progress and clogged the road of life from Adam downward, and they will do so to

the end of time. Religionists (the third section) are invested with a kind of traditional sanctity which invites respect, and therefore is not so easy to deal with. But the element of science ought to batter down even this respectable obstruction. That it is gradually doing so there can be no doubt, and there is reason to hope for it a practical triumph as the age advances. *

It is to be wished that the fears which are now harassing the inhabitants of Madrid as to the state of their Necropolis, in anticipation of a cholera invasion of that city, may also reach the great towns of England, and energize the authorities into intelligent and united action. Every great city should be provided with a Crematorium outside its walls; and its use should be enforced by law in all cases of death by infectious disease. This would be a step in the right direction, yielding such satisfactory results as should enforce the Legislature and the public to recognize Cremation as a necessity of scientific sanitary progress.

* *Note.*—Two of our English Bishops—Carlisle and Manchester—have recently spoken wisely on this subject, recognising the possibility of Cremation becoming necessary for sanitary reasons, and expressing their intention of offering no official opposition to its adoption. “We therefore commit his body to the fire, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” should be as acceptable to every intelligent Churchman as the textual reading with which we are familiar. And why should not the Church of Rome, which has fired the living so freely, assent without scruple to the firing of the dead?

